

# GUIDELINES FOR GRADUATE SUPERVISORY COMMITTEE MEETINGS

Regular committee meetings are a central part of graduate education in this department. The most important functions of these meetings are to give students a sense of how they're doing and to provide feedback and advice about their work. This is especially important during the early years of graduate study when students are just learning what it is to work as a scientist. It is vital that students maintain regular contact with their committees throughout graduate school. With this in mind the Graduate Committee has recently established new rules for committee meetings that we hope will maintain consistency in committee and student performance.

## **Meeting Schedule**

Newly admitted graduate students are required to have at least three committee meetings during their first 18 months in our program. These must take place at defined times: the first at 4-6 months, the second at 9-12 months and the third at 16-18 months after the student first enrolls in graduate school. Scheduling these meetings is the responsibility of students and their supervisors – they will not be set up automatically by the departmental administration.

## **Meeting Reports – to be submitted one week ahead of each meeting**

Students must submit a 10-20 page (double spaced, not including figures) report to their committee that briefly introduces their project, the work they have done previously (i.e. prior to the previous committee meeting) and since the last meeting. It is imperative that work completed since the previous meeting be identified so that the committee can assess the progress that has been made at the bench.

In addition to having sound scientific judgment, nothing is more central to the career of a scientist than being able to clearly explain scientific concepts in writing. We therefore expect our students to master the art of writing scientifically and these reports are part of this process: they will serve as important dress rehearsals for writing papers and theses later on. Any criticisms made of meeting reports will be revisited at subsequent meetings and it is expected that they will have been acted on.

We expect all students to master the literature that is relevant to their project during the first year of graduate studies: this includes those papers that make up the foundation of their project as well as those that deal with relevant technical issues. One way of assessing progress in this area is the reference list at the end of each report: these should be thorough citations and must be made using one of the formats accepted by journals (see for example <http://jb.asm.org/misc/ifora.shtml>).

The standards for presentation of data in these reports are identical to those in the journals: lanes in gels must be labeled, strains on plates must be identified, micrographs must be clearly labeled, graphs must include error bars as appropriate and so on.

The last page or two of each report should set out what the student expects to achieve in the block of time (usually 6 or 12 months) leading up to their next meeting. This does not need to be a detailed description of every technique to be employed, rather the goal is to explain the scientific questions to be addressed and briefly outline the approach that will be taken.

## **What happens at committee meetings?**

Typically students will come prepared to give a 20-30 minute presentation based on what they have described in their meeting report. Students should feel free to bring up any issues on which they would like guidance. The most common format is that committee members will interrupt the student as they proceed through their work and ask questions about anything that is relevant to the topic. This can include challenges on the interpretation of data, first principles, and scientific questions that are relevant to the topic or to planned experiments. Committee members may ask the student to briefly explain any of the references they cite in their report.

Students are asked to bring those lab note books containing relevant experimental observations to each meeting. One important aspect of the scientific method is the reproducibility of each important observation: typically the most publishable version of an experiment will be shown in the meeting report, however, students must be able to provide evidence that each observation has been made more than once.

**Are all committee meetings the same?**

No, especially in the early stages of graduate study, each committee meeting has a specific purpose that must be fulfilled.

**Meeting #1 (4-6 months)**

At this first meeting, the committee will look for at least two things: 1) the student must have made major inroads in understanding the literature of their field and 2) the student and his/her supervisor must have established a well-conceived project. The student should think of their meeting report as a proposal outlining their project and what questions they hope to address through their research. This should include short term goals (i.e. what the student is presently working on) and longer term goals (what the student intends to accomplish by the end of their degree). These short and long term considerations should be present in all meeting reports (and will obviously change as time goes by) but they are especially important at this early stage.

**Meeting #2 (9-12 months)**

At this meeting, any shortcomings identified in the previous meeting will be revisited to determine whether the student has taken the committee's recommendations to heart. By this time it is expected that the student will have made some progress towards fulfilling the goals of their project.

**Meeting #3 (16-18 months)**

The purpose of this meeting is to again assess the student's progress in terms of previous recommendations. As well, the committee and the student will determine whether the student, assuming they're interested in going on to doctoral studies, is a good candidate for the PhD reclassification exam – which must be taken before 2 years of graduate studies have elapsed.

**What happens if I only have negative data?**

Anyone who has worked as a scientist knows that even with determined effort, there will be periods when the only progress one can make is to learn that the avenue being investigated is a dead end. A student, who has made a good effort, carried out technically competent, well controlled experiments but not cracked the puzzle they are working on, will not be penalized. A good committee will know when a student needs encouragement in this regard and indeed, many students find that a committee meeting can be a good way to assess whether they should move on to some more profitable line of investigation.

**How does the committee assess my progress from one meeting to the next?**

Committees will fill out a form at the end of each meeting in which they outline the strengths and weaknesses of the student's performance and where they will record a detailed set of recommendations for the ensuing months. This form will be revisited at the next committee meeting to ensure that students act on the recommendations of their committee.

**Are there marks for committee meetings?**

Students will be assigned one of four grades by each of their committee members: "excellent", "satisfactory", "marginal" or "unsatisfactory". The rare instance in which a student receives two "unsatisfactory" will usually lead to expulsion from the program by the School of Graduate Studies.